

# NOT ENOUGH BUCK LICENSES

The fall 2006 slate of Game and Fish Department Advisory Board meetings will get underway later this month. It's a good bet that at more than one meeting an interested hunter will raise a concern related to licenses for antlered deer.

The concerns will likely come from hunters who did not get a buck license this year. These concerns will likely be accompanied by suggestions for increasing the odds for drawing buck licenses in the future.

Based on comments at meetings over the last few years, the two most common themes that hunters suggest for increasing success in drawing antlered deer licenses for the regular deer gun season are: 1) allowing each hunter only one buck license for the year (three are possible now – archery, regular gun and muzzle-loader); and 2) raising the price of a buck license to a point where it would become cost-prohibitive for a significant number of people to want to apply for one, thereby improving the odds for people who could afford the much higher price.

To gain some insight into the reasons people think there's a need for change, it's important to first look at the history of deer license allocation in North Dakota

## Lotteries for Licenses

The Game and Fish Department first began issuing buck-only licenses via lottery in 1975. Prior to that, hunters could buy a buck license straight from license vendors up until noon on opening day of the deer season. These buck licenses were not limited in number. "Any-deer" licenses, which allowed taking of does or bucks, were issued by lottery drawing.

Over time, Game and Fish biologists noted a marked increase in the number of buck-only licenses sold, while

the statewide deer population remained relatively stable through the 1960s and early 1970s. Changes were necessary because biologists felt antlered whitetails were being overharvested in parts of the state.

Starting in 1975, the Department began limiting the number of antlered deer licenses and tied them to specific, smaller units. At the time, the state's whitetail population wasn't nearly as high as it is now, and two severe winters – 1977-78 and 1978-79 – reduced deer numbers even more.

In 1974, the last year of unlimited buck tags, the state sold about 58,000 deer licenses. In 1979 only 40,000 permits for all deer were available statewide, but 50,000 people applied, meaning 10,000 people who wanted to hunt deer had to stay home.

Gradually, the state's deer population expanded. The disparity between the number of applicants and number of licenses eventually evened out, but some hunters still had to stay home because they couldn't get the exact license they wanted in the unit they wanted.

Given a choice, most deer hunters prefer to have a buck license. That's why the number of applications for buck licenses statewide has always exceeded the number of buck licenses available. On the other hand, most deer hunters would rather hunt does than not hunt at all during the years when total deer licenses were less than the total number of people interested. In some units, many hunters applied for doe licenses as first choices rather than risk not getting a license at all, or having to settle for a license in an unfamiliar unit.

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*In some North Dakota units, the odds of drawing a whitetail buck license are not as high as they once were, despite more licenses available.*



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As North Dakota's deer population continued to grow, license application patterns began to change. In recent years, almost all units have had antlerless whitetail licenses remaining after the first lottery drawing. Because of that, even more hunters are applying for a buck license as a first choice and a doe as a second choice – or they don't select for a doe license at all, knowing there will be antlerless licenses remaining in any number of units.

For example, in 2005, the first lottery drawing attracted 77,826 applicants (not including gratis, youth and non-residents) of which 67,485 (86.7 percent) applied for a buck license as a first choice. In 2000, the state had 74,746 resident applicants for regular deer gun licenses, with 57,620 (77 percent) selecting for a buck as their first choice.

In 1992, only 61.5 percent of lottery applicants tried for a buck license as their first choice. In 1985, the rate was 66 percent.

While the number of buck applicants went up 17 percent from 2000 to 2005, the number of buck licenses actually went up more than 19 percent. So while 2005 had about 1,400 more unsuccessful buck applicants than 2000, the percentage of people who drew buck licenses in the first lottery was actually higher last year.

While the overall numbers are roughly the same, some units have experienced marked declines in success rates for buck applicants. In other units, success rates have actually increased.

For example, in 1994 everyone who applied for any-buck licenses in units 2E and 2K2 drew their first choice of license. Last year, less than half of the 2K2 buck applicants, and only 60 percent in 2E, got their buck license.

In unit 2J1 north and east of Bismarck, only 24 percent of buck applicants got a license in 2005, compared to 62 percent in 1994.

In contrast, odds for drawing a buck license in units 2B and 1A have *improved* significantly in the last decade.

Each deer unit has its own set of dynamics at work that make lottery success rates go up or down. Over time, the Game and Fish Department's weighted lottery system will serve to even out the inequities, but currently there is an apparent adjustment taking place that is changing historic license distribution patterns in some units.

The Department's management focus the last several years has been to maintain or increase hunting pressure to reduce state deer numbers to a level that would support about 100,000 licenses per year, which is considerably fewer than the more than 140,000 available the last three years. In some units, the numbers are already approaching management objectives. As that happens, the number of doe licenses will often be reduced first, but there may come a time in future years when the current record number of deer hunters will vie for significantly fewer whitetail doe and buck licenses.

At the same time, the number of gratis deer licenses issued in North Dakota has increased, from an average of around 10,000 in the mid-1990s to around 13,000 in recent years.

To account for gratis licenses, the Game and Fish Department reduces the number of licenses available in the lottery. For instance, if the Department establishes a quota of 1,000 buck and 1,000 doe licenses for a unit, and in the previous year 200 landowners applied for gratis licenses in that unit, the Department takes 150 buck and 50 doe licenses off the top and makes 850 buck and 950 doe licenses available in the lottery. (The proportion of gratis licenses deducted from the buck and doe quota is based on the proportion of bucks and does harvested by gratis license holders.)

If the number of gratis applicants increases to 300, and the license numbers stay the same, only 775 licenses are then available in the lottery.

Each factor, while not overwhelmingly significant by itself, can combine with others to reduce the odds of someone receiving an antlered deer license.

It is not such an issue with people who prefer to hunt mule deer bucks, because for the most part they realize that in the main mule deer units it's not reasonable to expect a buck license more than once every four or five years.

Hunters at one time accustomed to getting a whitetail buck license every year, however, are not used to getting turned down several years in a row before they have accumulated enough bonus points to turn the odds in their favor.

Across the state, hunters are noticing these changes. A gun hunter, who is also a bowhunter, and is lucky enough to also draw a muzzle-loader whitetail buck license via lottery, could shoot three whitetail bucks in a year. To someone who has gone without a whitetail buck license for a couple of years, it's easy to look at the guy with three licenses and wonder about the equity of it all.

That's the challenge of managing deer in a state that has plenty of deer so everyone has an opportunity to hunt, but not enough so everyone can get the exact license they want every year.

The Department's weighted lottery system is designed to distribute licenses to those who have gone without their first choice the longest, but as application patterns continue to evolve, so too will the waiting periods for preferred licenses in some units. It shouldn't come as a surprise that hunters who are left out will be looking carefully at those who have more than one buck license, and want to even the odds.

*To pass along your comments, send us an email at [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov); call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*